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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000609

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: FM KOUCHNER VISIT SETS AGENDA FOR SEPTEMBER 3-4
SARKOZY TRIP TO DAMASCUS

DAMASCUS 00000609 001.2 OF 003

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11. (C) Summary: According to a French Embassy readout, French FM Kouchner's August 22-23 discussions with President Asad and FM Muallim focused on Lebanon, Russia/Georgia, human rights, Syria's indirect talks with Israel, and Iran in advance of President Sarkozy's September 3-4 visit to Damascus. Publicly, Kouchner declared France had "not placed conditions" for advancing bilateral relations with Syria, but privately he expressed "mild disappointment" that Lebanon and Syria could not exchange ambassadors more quickly than two-to-three months. Asad signaled no change in Syria's policy regarding demarcation of the Syrian-Lebanese border near Shebaa Farms. Kouchner reportedly called on Bashar and Muallim to release the 15 Damascus Declaration National Council members currently on trial. No longer claiming this to be a strictly internal issue, Asad indicated he might consider clemency if the accused were to appeal directly to the President via letter. Muallim informed Kouchner that the next round of indirect talks with Israel had been postponed to September 7 because of Israeli PM advisor Turbowitz's resignation. Asad reportedly left Russia disappointed after PM Olmert intervened directly with President Medvedev and convinced him to forgo an arms deal with Syria, an outcome that Kouchner saw as "just." End Summary

12. (C) According to French DCM Nicholas Surran, French FM Kouchner arrived in Damascus August 25, and held meetings with President Asad and FM Muallim in advance of President Sarkozy's September 3-4 visit to Damascus. Kouchner also met with French NGOs working with Iraqi refugees in Syria before departing August 26. The visit occurred as part of the deal reached between Presidents Asad and Sarkozy during their July meeting in Paris to hold two preparatory rounds, one in Paris (led on the Syrian side by D/PM Dardari) and a second in Damascus led by Kouchner. According to MFA advisor (and Orient Center Director) Samir al-Taqi, Syrian officials were nonplussed by Kouchner's August 24 remarks in Lebanon suggesting linkage between French-Syrian and Syrian-Lebanese relations. President Asad, al-Taqi added, also did not appreciate Kouchner's unfriendly remarks prior to Asad's July 12 arrival in Paris but saw Kouchner's visit as a "necessary evil" in advance of his summit with Sarkozy.

Israeli Track Main Syrian Concern

13. (C) Asad told Kouchner that the next round of indirect talks with Israel had been postponed until September 7 because of Israeli PM advisor Yoram Turbowitz's resignation, Surran recounted. (Note: This information contradicts what Samir al-Taqi told us August 25 -- namely, Turbowitz would continue his role in the indirect peace talks.) Surran also noted that, should there be direct talks between the two sides, the Syrians wanted to hold them in Paris with French and American participation. The Syrian President and FM expressed their concerns that the Golan track might be headed toward failure and urged Kouchner to use France's influence with Israel to keep the talks alive. Kouchner replied that Syria needed to remain committed to these discussions out of self-interest and because the talks had improved regional stability, according to Surran. Kouchner then asked Bashar what Syria had hoped to gain by pursuing an arms deal with Russia at the same time that it was seeking to preserve the Golan track. Bashar sheepishly said Syria was looking to augment its air defense system and hoped to exploit the crisis in Georgia to obtain Russian weapons it had long pursued. Hours after Asad left Russia, however, PM Olmert contacted Russian President Medvedev and urged him not to sell weapons to Syria. Medvedev agreed, and the Syrians were reportedly disappointed after having so little to show for their efforts to ingratiate themselves with the Russians. Kouchner later told French Embassy staff that this outcome seemed to be "just," claimed Surran.

Lebanon on the Right Track, Sort of

14. (C) Surran told us Asad was upbeat about the exchange of embassies and ambassadors with Lebanon, which he indicated would probably take two-to-three months. Lebanese FM

DAMASCUS 00000609 002.3 OF 003

Salloukh was due to visit in the coming week to meet Muallim and continue discussions narrowly focused on this agenda. Kouchner's public remarks were positive on movement toward establishment of diplomatic relations between Lebanon and Syria, but privately the French FM expressed "mild disappointment" that the exchange of ambassadors would take so long. Kouchner also saw no signs of change in Syria's position regarding Shebaa. President Asad reiterated his categorical insistence that demarcation of the borders around Shebaa Farms could occur only when Israel ended its occupation of the Golan, reported Surran. Muallim suggested Syria would consider favorably the idea of an interim UN force in Shebaa if Israel were to withdraw, but this would be as far as Syria would go.

15. (C) Regarding border demarcation and security, Secretary General of the Syrian-Lebanese High Council Nasri al-Khouri told us August 21 that Lebanese President Sleiman and Asad had agreed to resurrect an independent bilateral committee (which ran from 1964-1973) to review previous agreements and recommendations on this issue. (Note: According to Khouri, this independent committee had conducted many geographical surveys and drafted a list of recommendations for their capitals to consider. During the course of the committee's work, the members discovered that Shebaa Farms was actually Lebanese territory. Neither government had taken action on the committee's work after it disbanded in the wake of the October 1973 War.) Syria had favored creating a new committee but conceded in the end to Lebanese demands. Al-Khouri warned, however, that both sides would have to appoint members to staff the committee, and Syria would be likely to resist any efforts to do so until ambassadors had been exchanged.

16. (C) As-Safeer journalist Ziad Haydar told us August 26 that Kouchner also raised French concerns about mounting violence in northern Lebanon and the possibility the situation there could escalate. Asad reportedly replied this was a regional problem requiring French involvement, particularly since Israeli officials were publicly threatening to destroy Lebanon. Regarding release of prisoners and resolution of "missing" cases, the two sides have agreed to revise the 2005 bilateral committee created under the auspices of the High Council, an organization created by treaty between Lebanon and Syria in 1991 to oversee bilateral relations.

Kouchner Raises Human Rights

17. (C) FM Kouchner pressed for the release of Damascus Declaration National Council (DDNC) members currently on trial, Surran told us. Departing from previous talking points, Bashar replied he would give consideration to this request if the accused sent him a letter asking for clemency. Subsequently, Muallim suggested that he would do his best to use such a letter to advocate a decisive intervention by President Asad. (Note: Kouchner's visit coincided with the August 26 session of the trial against the 15 DDNC leaders. As expected, the trial was again postponed until September 26, well after Sarkozy's planned visit.) Surran thought the SARG's shift from "this is an internal matter we will not discuss" was a useful one that perhaps signaled a desire to find a solution. At the same time, Paris remained reluctant to issue any statements regarding Syrian human rights abuses, Surran said.

Iran Nuclear Program "Peaceful"

18. (C) Kouchner pressed Bashar and Muallim on their August 2-4 discussions with Iranian officials in Tehran and whether Syria judged Iran's refusal to cease enrichment to be a constructive move, relayed Surran. Bashar insisted Iran had provided every reassurance that its nuclear program was peaceful, and Syria took these words at face value. Kouchner asked whether Syria had asked Iran to provide tangible indicators of its peaceful intentions, as Sarkozy and Asad had discussed in Paris. Asad demurred, saying he had raised the issue in Tehran as promised and believed there to be no Iranian nuclear threat. Surran suggested that Kouchner did

DAMASCUS 00000609 003 OF 003

not press the point vigorously because he wanted to discuss the issue further with President Sarkozy before recommending how to proceed.

Sarkozy-Asad Agenda Crystallizing

19. (C) Surran said Kouchner's discussions with Asad and Muallim established the key topics for follow-up during Sarkozy's visit to Damascus:

-- Lebanon would take center stage, and Sarkozy would echo his FM's public praise of advances in bilateral relations while privately urging Bashar to do more to speed up the process of exchanging embassies and demarcating/securing borders, without going into great detail about the composition and mandates of bilateral committees charged with doing the work.

-- Sarkozy would push Syria to remain committed to the Golan

track and was considering Syria's request to lobby Israel.

-- On Iran, Kouchner assessed Syria's mediation role as lacking seriousness, according to Surran. It remains unclear in the French camp here whether Sarkozy will focus heavily on this subject for follow up.

-- Sarkozy is intent on briefing Asad on his efforts to secure a ceasefire and Russian withdrawal from Georgian territory, without directly confronting Bashar on his lopsided rhetoric blaming the U.S., Israel, and others for provoking Russia's "just" response.

-- It is likely Sarkozy will press Bashar on human rights issues to see whether there is more give in Syria's position with regard to the possibility of the release of DDNC leaders.

-- Sarkozy's main press events here will be a dedication address at the Charles DeGaulle Lycee and a meeting with the French expat community.

Protocol and Other Details

¶10. (C) A tired Surran told us Sarkozy's advance team would be arriving August 26 to begin prolonged discussions on protocol and security issues. Sarkozy had decided to stay in the Four Seasons Hotel instead of the Presidential guest palace, touching off what will likely be a week of delicate negotiations with the Presidential Protocol office. The French President's decision to travel with FM Kouchner and no other ministers also had raised concerns that France was losing interest in deepening commercial and cultural ties. Surran said a French developmental assistance team was in Syria to look at potential water and other projects, but Syria continues to hope for more signs of French interest in investing in Syria. There had been no discussion on a joint Sarkozy-Asad statement during Kouchner's visit, reported Surran, but the French fully expected the Syrians to make a request for one at the last minute.

¶11. (C) Comment: Surran's account of Kouchner's visit was punctuated by body language and snappy ripostes that indicated growing French Embassy amusement and perhaps frustration with Bashar and his staff. Some of this no doubt can be attributed to visit fatigue, and the French may be telling us what we want to hear, to a certain extent. But while the French Embassy remains the envy of many in the Damascus diplomatic community for its unrestricted high-level access to the SARG, the French themselves seem to see this as a mixed blessing and are openly acknowledging the uncertain durability of French-Syrian rapprochement and the willingness of the Syrian side to take positive concrete action. In particular, Asad's public statements in Russia regarding the crisis in Georgia prompted French Embassy eye-rolls and shoulder shrugs that conveyed astonishment with the unpredictable nature of Syrian policy declarations.
CONNELLY